

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Sabah

It is a great privilege for me to have known Sheikh Nasser. His immense curiosity and deep passion for Islamic Art was always compelling. His sense of humour, loyalty, and especially his wonderful enthusiasm are qualities I shall always remember and cherish.

In the Winter of 1974, Oliver Hoare and I formed Ahuan Islamic Art in London. Our first acquisition was an Egyptian white marble slab dated 356 A.H. (967 A.D.). We sold this to the British Museum - our very first sale. This was an auspicious start to our business partnership. Not long afterwards, in 1975, Sheikha Hussah and Sheikh Nasser Al-Sabah came into our lives and we immediately became firm friends.

As I recall, they were visiting London, where they consulted Sir Humphrey Wakefield. He was a Director of Mallett & Sons, who had also worked with Christie's where he knew Oliver. I believe they were seeking Sir Humphrey's advice about buying an Alexander Calder 'stable' for the garden of their home in Kuwait. He suggested that they ought also to consider collecting Islamic Art and recommended Oliver, who was both a friend and an expert in this field. On their first visit to our gallery at 71 Pavilion Road, they bought a matching pair of Mamluk enamelled glass beakers, their first pieces of Islamic Art.

Of course, this was just the starting point, leading to the formation of their quite extraordinary collection. I am proud to say that over the following years Ahuan was able to help them acquire a number of important works of art. Perhaps our single most rewarding experience was arranging for Sheikh Nasser to buy all the Islamic material in the collection of the Marquis de Ganay in Paris. This included a number of objects he and his brothers had inherited from their father, and from their Great Aunt, the celebrated collector and art patron Martine, the Comtesse de Béhague (1870 - 1939). Among these was an astonishing Fatimid rock crystal chess set.

By this time it was clearly the intention of Sheikha Hussah and Sheikh Nasser to share their collection and to show it publicly in Kuwait. They agreed to lend the collection to the Kuwait National Museum for display. Thus, in 1983, the '*Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah*' was inaugurated there. I shall never forget the opening celebrations. Guests came from all over the world, including numerous distinguished members of the former ruling families of India, many of whom were wearing the most extraordinary Mughal jewellery, something Sheikh Nasser found particularly enticing. Several of the former Maharajas outshone the bejewelled ladies at this splendid occasion.

On the eve of the opening, both Sheikha Hussah and Sheikh Nasser were busy late into the night, as part of the team cleaning all the glass cases, dressed far less formally than on the following day. Perhaps the funniest memory I have of this glorious event was when Sheikh Nasser led his Highness the Emir and numerous other members of the Al-Sabah family and Kuwaiti dignitaries, through the newly opened galleries. All were dressed in their smartest *bishts*, edged in gold and silver embroidery. As they approached the display cases, each of which was individually fitted with an alarm, the build up of static electricity from the *Zari* embroidery set these off serially, case by case, provoking a cacophony of ringing bells.

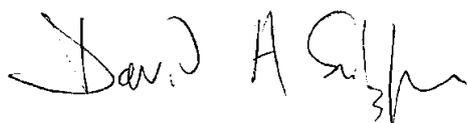
In February 1991, I was in Riyadh the day the armed forces of the Iraqi invaders pulled out of Kuwait. Three days later, I drove there in a jeep filled with bottled water, oranges, and laden with 'jerrycans' of extra fuel, up through Khafji and over the abandoned frontier border crossing, arriving in flame-lit Kuwait City late in the evening. As I had often done in the past, I stayed at the Hilton hotel. This time the weirdest thing was the complete absence of room doors, all of which, strangely, the departing Iraqis had stolen.

The following morning I went to the National Museum. I knew of course that the collection had been stolen and taken to Baghdad not long after the invasion. On entering the devastated museum, it immediately became clear to me that, ironically, the removal of the priceless works of art was perhaps a blessing in disguise, since the entire interior had been trashed and set on fire. Tragically this destroyed the monumental carved and painted wooden doors from Fez which had stood dominantly as an 'entrance' to the collection. These were simply too large to have been taken away. As I walked through the museum, I found myself wading knee-deep through ash and debris. It was eerie and extremely sad and the acrid smell of smoke brought tears to my eyes.

I drove out the next day to see Sheikha Hussah and Sheikh Nasser's wonderful home, designed by the great Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy. This too had been vandalised and desecrated in the most horrible way. Both indoors and in the surrounding park, quantities of shell casings and other detritus of war were everywhere underfoot. I was thus able to inform Sheikh Nasser and Sheikha Hussah immediately after liberation that I had visited the museum and their home and that at least the buildings remained intact. My reaching Kuwait at the end of this catastrophic period certainly enhanced our friendship. I was privileged to continue seeing them both there and elsewhere over the next three decades.

Sheikh Nasser's interests were of course wide and varied. Knowing me well, he was aware of my own personal enthusiasm for vintage and classic automobiles and enjoyed riding in my old Bentley. He kindly arranged for me to see several fine local examples. Sheikha Hussah too was fond of beautiful cars and herself drove with great flair. On one visit to London, Sheikh Nasser asked me if I might help find him a suitable Rolls Royce: it had to be classic in shape and old-fashioned looking, with large separate head-lamps, like twin champagne-buckets, but also have the modern benefits of automatic transmission and power steering. I was lucky to locate a lovely example of a 1955 Silver Wraith Town Limousine, with coachwork by the renowned British firm of Hooper. Distinctively painted in black with primrose yellow sides, this grand and 'Majestic' motorcar appealed to Sheikh Nasser, and he bought it immediately. A small enhancement was that it had the distinguished licence plates 'LUX 555' ! Some time later Sheikh Nasser told me he had presented it as a gift to H.H. the Emir of Bahrain.

The Al-Sabah Collection of Islamic Art will remain a lasting testimony to Sheikh Nasser's passion for both history and beauty and bear witness to his deeply generous nature, sharing with others what he himself so enjoyed. I shall deeply miss his excellent company and wonderful smile.



David A. Sulzberger

